

Homecomings: Poetic reformulations of dwelling in Jo Shapcott, Alice Oswald, and Lavinia Greenlaw

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Abstract

In the study *The Last of England?*, Randall Stevenson refers to the idea of landscape as “the mainstay of poetic imagination” (Stevenson 2004:3). With the rise of the postmodern idiom, our relationship to the “scapes” that surround us has become increasingly problematic and the idea of place is also increasingly deferred and displaced. This article examines the relationship between self and “scapes” in the poetries of Jo Shapcott, Alice Oswald and Lavinia Greenlaw, who are all concerned with various “scapes” and who present different, yet connected, strategies for negotiating our relationships to them.

Keywords: shifting territories; place; contemporary poetry; postmodernity

In *The Last of England?*, Randall Stevenson points to how the mid-century renunciation of empire was followed by changes that need to be understood primarily in terms of *loss*. Each of these losses are conceived as marking the last of a certain kind of England, he says, and while another England gradually emerged, this was an England less unified by tradition and more open in outlook, lifestyle, and culture, in short, a place characterised by factors that render it more difficult to define (cf. Stevenson 2004: 1-10). Along with these losses in terms of national character, Stevenson holds, the English landscape also seemed to be increasingly imperilled. While this landscape had traditionally been “the mainstay of poetic imagination” it now seemed in danger of disappearing, as signalled in Philip Larkin’s poem “Going, Going”, where he laments an “England gone, / The shadows, the meadows, the lanes” (Stevenson 2004: 3).

For poets like Philip Larkin, Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, landscapes were undoubtably vital in constructing a sense of identity and self. These poets favoured what one might refer to as vertical trajectory, focussing on the relationships between nature, history and identity and seeking out the legendary depths that were, at least in Hughes’ case, “as deep as England” (Hughes 2003: 85). The impact of Hughes’ poetry is suggested in Sean O’Brien’s lecture “As Deep as

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England”, where he points out that while “England” and “Englishness” are complicated terms, the imagined England contrived by Hughes creates a place that in many ways feels like home (O’Brien 2011: 7-8).

For Stevenson, however, it is not only the landscape itself that is now in danger of being lost, but also the relationship between nature and human being, which became increasingly problematic to forge with the rise of the postmodern idiom (Stevenson 2004: 3). While the vertical trajectory of Hughes and Heaney might have been challenged by a younger generation of poets, however, there are also suggestions that landscape remains the “mainstay of the poetic imagination”, as is signalled by the recent anthology *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry* (2013), which attempts to map the significance of place and space in contemporary poetry. In accordance with this suspicion, this article proposes to examine three works by the contemporary poets Jo Shapcott, Alice Oswald and Lavinia Greenlaw, who are all concerned with various “scapes” and who present strategies for negotiating the relationship between body and dwelling, identity and place, present and past, in order to be able to say what home truly is. In their own unique ways, all of these writers have shown great interest in exploring the relationships between self and its surrounding landscape, showing us that poetic language is still mobilised in representing and exploring being in the world.

While Hughes could seek out the depths that were “as deep as England” and Heaney could declare that he used his pen as a tool for digging, however, these poets view landscape in terms of a horizontal trajectory, focussing on movement, exile, distance, as well as the margins and boundaries that are frequently overlooked. In *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets*, Deryn Rees-Jones points to Elizabeth Bishop as a common influence for both Shapcott and Greenlaw, a link that is also made by Linda Anderson in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*. Both Rees-Jones and Anderson point out that these poets share with Bishop a sense of movement, as well as an interest in incorporating of science as a way of “rethinking fixed structures and empirical givens” (Rees-Jones 2005: 217; Anderson and Shapcott 2002: 8). While Oswald’s focus on nature and mythology frequently leads to a comparison with Ted Hughes, (Rees-Jones 2005: 217; Sampson 2012: 154) she, too, displays a perception of the world that emphasises movement and dis-placement, which also links her to

Bishop. The focus on formation, decentralisation and process, moreover, is something that all of these poets share, whether in the form of Jo Shapcott's transformative selves, Alice Oswald's new cartographies, or in Lavinia Greenlaw's interest in science as a site in which the locality of self can be (re-)thought. In this, these poetic languages can seem to be united by explorations of new geographies as part of a process that is ongoing, unsettled and radically open.

In order to adequately investigate the poetic idioms of these three contemporary poets, the discussion will refer itself to theorists who have showed similar concerns and whose writings are seen to be a contribution to the analyses, that is, T. S. Eliot, Julia Kristeva, and Martin Heidegger. All of these writers are concerned with countering what Edward S. Casey has termed the temporocentric perspective of our own time, and to lure place from its hiding place, or, in a reformulation of Alice Oswald, to draw distance around their shoulders and mark the makings of a new kind of poetics of landscape (Casey 1998: x).

Exile, travel, rootlessness

In his anthology of British and Irish poetry after 1945, *The Firebox*, Sean O'Brien points to the aspects of postmodernism that he views as most pertinent for contemporary poetry (O'Brien 2003:xxxv). Among these, we find interest in the use of narrative, a sceptical view of the fixity of meaning, and the tendency to use various historical literary forms as an ironic pattern-book, so that "a postmodernist poem may often seem partly a parody and writing is often constructed as rewriting" (ibid.). In this context, the "post-" in "postmodern" is not primarily a signal of belatedness, but a suggestion of the ways in which the literary work situates itself in relation to a history which it proceeds to problematise. In his writings on postmodernism, Thomas Docherty cites Jean-Francois Lyotard who suggests that the "post" of postmodernism may be understood in terms of "ana", asserting that "it does not signify movements of the type come back, flash back, feed back, that is to say repetition, but rather a process in 'ana-', a process of analysis, of anamnesis, of analogy, of anamorphosis, a process which elaborates an 'initial forgetting'" (Docherty 1997:219). For Lyotard, this reformulation functions to emphasise that postmodernism is an event that defies narrow definitions, that is playful as well as the comprehensive.

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In this manner, postmodernism also always involves a gesture towards the past. For the poets explored in this essay, such a gesture is not easily made, however. In the essay “Confounding Geography”, Jo Shapcott notes that as a young writer she was told to “delve into the language and landscape of your own territory” (Anderson and Shapcott 2002: 114). While for Heaney the landscape and place names of his home could become “soft-gradient / of consonant, vowel meadow” (“Anahorish”), Shapcott says that she grew up in a new town where there was “absolutely no vowel meadow, and where the spoken language was flat, a version of London watered down by a mild accumulation of the various modes of speech of the many people who had moved there from all over the place” (ibid.). As a result, Shapcott relates herself to an aesthetic that is different from Heaney’s centered *omphalos* (“navel”), namely one of displacement, both in terms of time and place, or what she herself refers to as an aesthetic of “travel, rootlessness, and exile” rather than “continuity” (Heaney 2002:3; ibid.).

This is something that Shapcott thematises throughout her *oeuvre*, whether through intersubjective, geographical, or temporal relationships. One interesting example is the poem “On Tour: The Alps”, where the poetic subject finds herself faced with the overwhelming presence of the literary canon through the concrete manifestations of Byron, Wordsworth and Goethe (Shapcott 2000: 60-64). As in much of her writing, Shapcott’s poetic idiom is here light with a touch of the comedic. The lightness establishes a linguistic fluidity through which the poetic persona is allowed to raise some vital issues concerning the possibilities of enunciating and placing the subject in time and space.

The title of the poem suggests the way in which we are always posited *in medias res*, in the midst of historicity, at the same time as it renders the journey as the motif guiding the movements of the poem and furthermore one that is *in process*. This suggestion is developed in the first line, in which the poetic persona declares that “But today the sun shines as we arrive” (2000: 60). There is an interesting sense of conflict in this first verse. While the conjunction “But” signals a relation to *something else*, something that has gone before, the verb “to arrive” indicates a sense of ending inextricably connected to place, as can be seen in the etymological roots of the verb. To “arrive” originates in the Latin *ad ripa*, which means “to shore”, that is, to reach shore, or land,

after a long journey. Hence, “to arrive” is an ending which is always also new beginning and part of the process of becoming.

This conflict between different temporalities is developed as the poetic speaker problematises the relationship between her own presence and a past in which someone has always already arrived. This “always already” is referred to in the title “On Tour: The Alps”, which evokes Wordsworth’s crossing of the Alps as rendered in *The Prelude*, and is emphasised as the poetic speaker places herself physically in an interstice, symbolised by the “pass” in line three:

But today the sun shines as we arrive
at the highest point, and my bloke’s grumbling
that a pass is a strange place to stop. No one
else sleeps over he says – other tourists pause
(2000: 60)

Shapcott’s comprehension of time and place in these lines are heavily informed by the patterns of postmodernism, in the sense that “pass” simultaneously refers to place (space) and time. The pass is an in-between where spaces and times encounter and contradict each other. This also seems to be a description of the poetic subject’s situation, moreover. She is in a space where she both tries to form an overview of the landscape *and* confront the voices and the conflicts from present and past that threaten to overwhelm her own sense of being and to prevent her from finding her own voice in the middle of things.

Throughout the poem the speaker deliberates on her own difficulty in finding a sense of direction, in relation to her own self as well as in the overwhelming presence of the other. When Byron invites her into his carriage, she becomes disoriented and incapacitated, and ends up on her own in a landscape which is unnameable, foreign and “where no one speaks / a language I know” (Shapcott 2000: 61). Similarly, Wordsworth leaves her in the dark, “set / against herds you can’t see but hear / in soft clangs as they move through the mist” (2000: 62). Towards the end of the poem, the poetic speaker sums up her own situation by saying that

[...] it’s hard to tune my ear to it
against so many men’s voices shouting
all the names they know, at the dark.
(2000: 64)

The manifestation of the literary figures of Goethe, Wordsworth and Byron, who are largely united in the persona of her lover, comprises a clear example of the ways in which the living presence of the past can appear as an impediment in the present. Shapcott herself has described the poem as “[...] a record of the speaker’s effort to locate herself both in relation to this tradition and at the same time necessarily outside it” (Shapcott qtd in Rees-Jones 2005: 223), emphasising the way in which the (female) subject is always placed in the margin in terms of the always already and the importance of locating a place (or a landscape) where one can dwell poetically.

For Shapcott, dwelling does not mean finding a home in a place that is stable, permanent and intimately familiar. Travel, rootlessness and exile mean that both language and place are viewed as “less certain” and “shifting territories” are the norm (Anderson and Shapcott, 2002: 115).

Similar concerns can be found in the poem “Motherland”, where the themes of alienation, rootlessness and exile are suggested already in Shapcott’s reference to the Russian poet Maria Tsvetaeva. For Tsvetaeva, Shapcott says, the concept of a motherland seems to evoke “its landscapes” and a sense of “nostalgia and passion” in relation to the history of Russia (Anderson and Shapcott 2002: 116). Shapcott’s version, however, carries a different emotional tone and problematises the relationship between one’s self and surroundings.

In her essay “About Chinese Women” Julia Kristeva refers to Maria Tsvetaeva as a poet whose very relations to the “mothering” aspect of language, that is, of the unnameable and transcendent beholder referred to as *khôra*, lead to her demise (Kristeva 1986: 157). For Kristeva, this is a danger that looms over all female avant-garde poets. They are always already doomed because whereas male poets such as Céline can approach the semiotic aspects of language, because he is awarded certainty about his own identity within the symbolic order, the female poet will always have unresolved issues with them. While Kristeva emphasises the importance of the female poet, who speaks from a space that Western tradition regards as liminal and unconscious, this point of enunciation is simultaneously dangerous in that the female balances on a precarious border between the semiotic and the symbolic, between the abysmal chasm of *khôra* and the Name of the Father, which will always remain open and unresolved. In this context, the “motherland” referred to in Shapcott’s (as well as Tsvetaeva’s) title, is an implicit threat to the

formation of female selfhood. When the female loses sight of the symbolic and becomes immersed in the semiotic motherland, she simultaneously succumbs into madness and suicide, as can be seen with poets such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Maria Tsvetaeva. Although Kristeva's theories on this point seem on the verge of falling into the trappings of essentialism, her thoughts are interesting for their presentation of the double-bind within which the enunciating self is inevitably caught.

In Shapcott's poem, moreover, the poetic subject is repeatedly faced with a language that is closed off to her. The words that she wants to utter are unavailable, as suggested in the first stanza:

Language is impossible
in a country like this. Even
the dictionary laughs when I look up
"England", "Motherland", "Home".

(Shapcott 2000: 124)

What is problematised here, is the way in which language is also restricted by the parochial boundaries of the symbolic order, represented by the dictionary. These borderlines signal how the framework, or, indeed, scape, of language fails to provide the means to express that which needs to be said, leaving the subject ridiculed, abated, and powerless.

It is also interesting to note how the signifiers "England", "Motherland", "Home" become emblems of the unsayable on a number of different levels. While the words are, in fact, uttered, Shapcott's attitude towards them only seems to widen the Saussurean gap between signifier and signified, and accentuates the division and incoherence that governs a language which is so inadequate that it seemingly can have no part in the formation of a subjective identity.

As in "On Tour: The Alps" Shapcott also makes use of irony to problematise language as an element which only allows for "distance". While irony is frequently regarded as a subversive tool that provides the speaking subject with new formations of language, Shapcott's poetic subject experiences irony in the mocking laughter of the dictionary, which is yet another indication of the incongruity between signifier and signified, between the word and its literal meaning. To the subject, the ironic laughter of the dictionary is alienating to the extent that it calls

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upon Kristeva's writings on the abject or even Freud's writings on the uncanny. Language works on its own accord, it seems, as the dictionary

insists on falling open instead
three times out of the nine I try it
at the word "Distance" – degree
of remoteness, interval of space

(2000: 124)

Interestingly, the OED does, indeed, fail to provide definitions of the words that Shapcott needs, rendering "England" and "Motherland" empty signs which are only characterised by their absence, whereas "Home" is only present with the small letter *h*, making it a general concept which has no particular bearing to the poetic speaker. While it is defined as "the place where one lives permanently, esp. as a member of a family or household", adding that lack of article of possessive renders "home" a noun "representing the centre of family life", the lack of the capital letter functions as yet another ironic and distancing comment on the poetic speaker's subjective need to feel the immediate presence of the word and to *be* in the house of language as a place of fixity, unity and centredness.

The way in which language fails to provide her with a "Home" is reminiscent of Heidegger's discussions of the concept of "dwelling". "Dwelling", Heidegger says, means "to take shelter" (Heidegger 1971: 145). This sense of "dwelling" is very much connected with the idea of having a Home in the sense of being absolutely present, and is also inextricably connected with *mitsein*, or *being-with* in a community. In his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking", Heidegger demonstrates that the Old High German word for building, *baun*, which means "to dwell", partly has its origins in the word *Nachbar*, "neighbour". Thus, *dwelling* is augmented with additional meanings which take the near-dweller into account, expanding both the space of the dwelling, and the way in which a dwelling is to be undertaken. A home provides a shelter for the individual being by providing a space in which not only being, but beings of different selves can find protection and means of preservation. This idea is further developed in Heidegger, when he shows us how *baun* is connected with the cogito, transforming *ich bin, du bist* into a statement of "I dwell, you dwell" (cf. Heidegger 1971: 147). This

connection is also suggested in the OED, where *to be* is defined as to “have a place in the realm of fact”.

It is here that we touch upon the main problem in terms of Shapcott’s sense of belonging. Her attempts to find a “place in the realm of fact” prove useless as language works against her by transforming the words “home, England, motherland” into an unreachable, decentred and unmeasurable “distance”. Rather than providing a space in which the subject can be in a community with the other, language offers only the vastness of distance. The immensity of this distance, which is “ingrained like pain” to such an extent that the subject is forced to reiterate the phrase “so much” in relation to both present and future, makes any sense of objective an impossibility. If anything, the dictionary’s lead only takes her further away from the envisioned goal of her quest, resulting in a Blakean image of impossibility and stasis, as the subject recedes “further and further into the cold stars” (Shapcott 2000: 124).

Accordingly, the poem ends up by performing a circular movement. While the first two verses declare that “Language is impossible / in a country like this”, the final stanza enunciates that “This country makes me say / too many things I can’t say” (ibid.). The poetic speaker again and again fails to inject words such as “England”, “Motherland”, “Home” with immediacy and meaning, and the dictionary falls open on “distance” “three times out of the nine” (ibid.). Hence, when the poem unites the three words by referring to “England” as “Home / of me, myself, my Motherland”, this is an ironic echo of the dictionary’s mocking call to “Come back HOME!”. In the same way as there is no Home, there is no “Motherland” in the sense of an originary, feminine space that might ground language as a meaningful location in which the subject can unfold as a presence-in-the-world. Here, “Motherland” comes across as an ironic nothingness, echoing the absence of the subject in a wasteland where the length of space separating things and beings is all there is.

Interestingly, the poetization of place as distance is also problematised in the poem “Goat”, which presents a poetic speaker whose need to actualise selfhood ends up with a transformation. The poem opens with a reiteration of distance, establishing a time and place which re-presents the length of space separating things and beings: “Dusk, deserted road, and suddenly / I was a goat” (Shapcott 2000: 48). The time “Dusk” is the temporal equivalent to the mountain pass in the

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sense that it designates a period in-between night and day, and the place is a “deserted road”, a non-place which comprises the distance between two points. This time and place lends a sense of mythical ritual to this poem, suggesting that the recognition of liminality might be instrumental in effecting the transformation. The subject’s acknowledgement of the in-betweens allows her to place herself in this open landscape, which, it seems, she can only enter as a goat.

The transformation of being extends into a felt experience of place and of *mitsein*:

The road was not deserted any more, but full
of goats, and I liked that, even though I hate
the rush hour on the tube, the press of bodies
(2000: 48)

In this openness, moreover, the subject comes truly into presence, as it allows itself to encounter limits: “I ended up on the edge / of the crowd where the road met the high hedgerow”. Rather than an act of marginalisation, the event of ending “up on the edge” is experienced as something pleasurable, because of the absolute openness of the, albeit domesticated, animal. The goat is able to take in the world in a manner that is impossible to the human being, and the subject realises that it wants to “eat everything. I could have eaten the world / and closed my eyes to nibble at the high / sweet leaves against the sunset”. At this point, however, the structures of the symbolic order intervene. The “sunset” signals the transition from a landscape in-between, the open space of “dusk”, to the clearly defined “night”, thus reinserting the subject into the strict patterns of binary opposites, where the road as a place can not be experienced in its presence, but is regarded only in terms of the two points that it leads from and to, rendering it mere distance.

For the goat, the edge of the road is not a transitional space, nor is the road a route from one point to the other. It is a dwelling, where one can “live for the push / of goat muscle and goat bone”. But in the final verses of the poem, the goat in the road is displaced for “a tiny, human figure” in the “empty corridor” of an “office block”, reinserting us into the displaced existence of “Motherland”, that is, a non-place rather than a place where her natural participation in the surrounding landscape is signalled in the declaration that she “could have eaten the world” (2000: 48).

In a prose text, Shapcott says that animals “make us wonder how we can know them, how we can know anything ‘other’ at all, and how we can know ourselves” (Shapcott 2003: 260). This observation could be further problematised by asking how we can explore anything other through a medium that is also fundamentally other, namely language. While the recognition of this problem underlies Shapcott’s poetry, she simultaneously tackles it through a faith that poetic language does have the ability to speak. In an interview she says that “I’m convinced [that poetry] is still the language people speak at moments of high emotion: when something terribly important happens to someone they first turn to poetry to express it” (Shapcott 2006, Poetry Archive). In this, there is a seriousness in her poetry which directs itself towards a centre that defies the playfulness of postmodernism, and which, although it might not be aimed towards a stable sense of identity, is nevertheless concerned with constructing the self in scapes of speech, as moments where being finds itself absolutely present within a place which is created through and as language.

Alice Oswald displays similar views and preoccupations, as suggested by the epigraph to *Dart* declaring that “water always comes with an ego and an alter ego” (Oswald 2002). As mentioned above, Oswald has frequently been described as a nature poet, and her work is crucially concerned with natural landscape and displays a particular kind of eco-connection to the land. In the same prose epigraph, Oswald describes her long poem as “made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart”, juxtaposing not only the presence of the river with the human beings that interact with it, but also the languages of these people, which are joined together and transformed in a poetic idiom. Oswald comments on this transformation herself, when she says that she has created characters from these voices, linking them so that they become a “sound map” of the river, a “songline from the source to the sea”. As tropes, “sound map” and “source to the sea”, are also evocative of Eliot’s “auditory imagination”, which relates the creative act to the capacity to listen. Eliot’s auditory imagination refers itself to “the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back”, thus fusing “the most ancient and the most civilized mentality” (qtd in Heaney 2002:77). This very complex citation has

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many implications and nuances. On the one hand it seems to read our relationship to origins as one of reciprocal mutuality, which is collective or communal in a deep, unconscious sense. On the other hand, it says something about poetic language, defining it as a discourse which is permeated with this past and which performs the function of bringing it back to us, recalling for us the place of our collective origins. In this context, poetry could be viewed as a direct path of return to the *oikos* (“home”, or “the place of dwelling”), or, to paraphrase Heidegger, poetry is both what first brings the human onto the earth, what makes us belong to it, and, finally, what brings us into dwelling (Heidegger 1971: 90).

In *Dart*, the “auditory imagination” is, perhaps, somehow present as a movement which returns to the origin and brings something back, also echoing Hughes’ plunge into the “legendary depth” of a pond that is “as deep as England” (Hughes 2003: 85). Interestingly, however, Oswald reformulates the idea of a source, or legendary depth, by picturing it as a river which is in continuous movement, process and transformation, rather than as a unified entity located in a centre of verticality. The idea of cartography, moreover, comprises a democratic vision of being, suggesting that the voices and the languages of human selves are somehow naturally interlinked with the landscape. While Shapcott felt alienated by Heaney’s “vowel meadows”, Oswald seems to be able to establish a dialogue with the landscape through her “sound map”, whose human voices, she instructs us, should be read as concomitant with “the river’s mutterings” (ibid.).

In *Dart*, the river is a landscape that is both interior and exterior, physical and spiritual, offering encounters and dialogue between everything that exists. In this context, it is also significant that the name *Dart* is identified in the notes as “old Devonian for oak” (Oswald 2002: 11). In the part of the poem where this definition is offered, the river runs through an oak wood where a forester is working, cutting down trees. His speech glides over into that of a watery nymph, who proceeds to interconnect the landscape of the moving waters with that of the ancient soil and forest by informing us that “They say all rivers were once fallen trees” (2002: 12). The watery nymph goes on by apostrophically calling on Rex Nemorensis, explained in a note as “the King of the Oakwoods who had to be sacrificed to a goddess”, and “Flumen Dialis”, which the note refers to as “a priest of Zeus [...] the god of the oak” (ibid.). This part of the poem is a prayer for renewal and resurrection, for continued

circularity and the eternal return of everything. While the river takes life, it also gives it back, and the watery nymph prays that

come spring that
lights one oak
off the next

and the fields
and workers bursting
into light amen

(2002: 13-14)

The way in which everything becomes unified as it bursts into light is reminiscent of Ted Hughes' "That Morning" from the collection *River*. Hughes' poem ends with a joyous apprehension of the absolute, as the poetic persona asserts "So we stood, alive in the river of light / Among the creatures of light, creatures of light" (Hughes 1993: 179). In the same manner as the explosion of light envelops every being in Oswald's poem, Hughes' subject takes part in a deeply significant experience in which a moment of being takes place between the material and spiritual worlds, as civilisation encounters the purity of nature. While Hughes centres his poem on a poetic speaker, however, Oswald's poem once again has a more fluid framework and is manifested as polyphonic intersections between river and other. This renders *Dart* more challenging to the idea of self, which is established as plural, flowing and semiotic, barely audible, and perhaps even indecipherable. The river being, or fluid being, is an ancient being which simultaneously exists as a "living presence" in a relational sense, signalling a comprehension of ipseity as something that primarily comes into being as *mitsein*.

In a traditional symbolic context, the oak is regarded as a channel of communication between Heaven and Earth, suggesting that the incorporation of the oak tree comprises a vertical movement. At the same time, one may also view the river itself as a sacred element, comprising a parallel to the oak as a holy vessel. The watery nymph explicitly thematises what the river is in itself, through her references to oak trees, Zeus and the ancient King of the Oakwoods. This extended conception of the river emphasises the fluidity of forms and the holy circularity of fertility, of death and renewal.

The reference to the oak tree also has another, more concretely cultural, reference to the landscape of being, however, in the sense that it

is England's national tree. As an emblem of England, the oak symbolises the strength and endurance of the nation, signalling its continued function as a ground of experience and upholder of a heterogeneous and polyphonic, yet strangely unified, identity and sense of self.

The complex and varied relationship between landscape and being is also signalled in the opening lines, where Oswald presents the reader with an old man who is "seeking and finding a difficulty" (Oswald 2002: 1). The connection between man and river is established through the movement implied in "seeking". Like the river, the man is "keeping his course through the swamp spaces / and pulling the distance around his shoulders". As the old man consults his map, the river responds by issuing the "sound map" referred to in the epigraph, and calls out to him, something which seemingly amounts to a calling out to itself: "The Dart, lying low in darkness calls out Who is it? / trying to summon itself by speaking ..." (ibid). The implication here is that the river is unknown to itself, presumably mirroring the old man, who is seeking, trying to find his way by referring himself to the map, and trying to transform distance into a nearness, where the place sought is the place reached, or, at least, a place that will provide a shelter which can protect him on his journey.

By asking the question "who is it?" the swamp landscape is transformed into a scape where the old man is allowed to speak, and he introduces himself, singing his own song, which is also the river, singing of itself, as it has, indeed, summoned itself by speaking. In this, we are listening to the simultaneous voices of the ego and the alter ego, the man and the river. The language and the landscape, in fact, are presented in a simultaneous speech. The voices of the human being and river being intermingle, something that is partly achieved through the use of enjambment, which suggests the separate yet unified process of speaking. The flow of words on the page is also the flow of the language of the beings, in the sense that one I follows the other in a natural sequence challenging, yet affirming, the distinction between the two, uniting them in the simultaneous presences of language and landscape (e.g. 2002: 2).

Interestingly, the poem also presents the being's identity as inextricably linked with origins. This is suggested by the declaration that "I know who I am, I / come from the little heap of stones up by Postbridge" (2002: 4). This is not origin in the traditional sense of a unity beyond space and time, however, but something mundanely and acutely

concrete, namely “the little heap of stones up by Postbridge”. At first sight, this surprisingly straightforward assertion seems to comprise a playful challenge to the Derridean postulation that origin does not exist except as a trace, rendering it forever deferred (Derrida 1998: 61). At the same time, Oswald also seems to signal that while the river does have one traceable and physical origin, this is of less importance than its innumerable beginnings, as suggested by the plurality of voices through which the river continuously broadens its base of being until the end of the poem, when it reaches the sea and proceeds to flow into a cave where it presents itself to a flock of seals who gather there in winter.

The encounter with the sea marks an interesting transformation as the great river is reduced to a series of drops of freshwater “drip drip drip / where my name disappears and the sea slides in to / replace it” (2005: 48). In this cave, the past and the present encounter the future in the form of the “genital smell / of things not yet actual: shivering impulses, shadows / propensities”, signalling a distension of self in space as well as time. This process simultaneously encounters its counterpart in the massive concreteness of the seals, who are “all swaddled / and tucked in fat, like the soul in its cylinder of flesh” (ibid.). The seals appear antithetical to the protean malleability of the river, something that is directly enunciated in the final verses of the poem. When the seals’ “eyes”, that is, their selves, ask “who’s this moving in the dark”, the river answers:

[...] Me.
This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy,

All names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,
Whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,
driving my many selves from cave to cave...
(ibid.)

The name that the river awards itself is really a negation of name-giving in the sense that it refers to the perpetual shape-shifter who has even donated his name to the English adjective *protean*, meaning “polymorphous, ever changing, unstable”. The way that Oswald ends her poem, with the image of the river being driving its multiple selves “from cave to cave” is also evocative of postmodernist explorations of ipseity as a process of becoming. Through the fluid being of the river the past becomes a living present, and historicity becomes an eventuality rather

than a punctuality, incorporating within itself the prospective presence of the future. Oswald has said that she is fascinated by the “feeling of movement in Homer”, which differs from the writing of later Greek poets, that she finds “very conditioned through the eye” (Oswald 2003: 31). The kind of fluidity suggested here is also manifested by the three dots that end the poem, manifesting the mobility and mutability of poetic discourse as it is subtly altered into the page’s blankness. In an interview Oswald says that “I love etc and dot dot dot. I feel the universe is constructed with an etc.” (*The Observer* 19 June, 2005), suggesting that the universe is a landscape which is constantly crossing over its own boundaries in an expansion of self.

Such an opening up of selfhood is also explored in Oswald’s collection, *Woods etc.*, where a polymorphous and multifarious sense of self is explored through a variety of form (the collection consists of rhymed and unrhymed sonnets, free verse, ballads etc.) and a metaphoric range which stretches from trees, outer space, birds, stones, and fields. The collection starts by placing itself in the context of *Dart*, asking a question which has always already been answered at the same time as the answer is irrelevant except in the constantly repeated act of posing itself. The first verse in “Sea Poem” asks “what is water in the eyes of water”, pointing back by starting the sentence with the small letter *w* and pointing forward by omitting the question mark at the end, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of an open modality of vision which takes heed of the “eyes”, I’s and selves. While *Dart* is unified by the river expanding and exploring itself, *Woods etc.* is unified by “etc.” as a decentred, but ongoing, focus on being. In Leo Mellor’s *TLS* review, he deems this collection as characterised by a “non-specificity of place” (*TLS* 3 June 2005). While *Dart* was marked by specific references to places and landmarks, “the co-ordinates are mistily vague” in this collection rendering it a different kind of cartographic exercise, which does not focus so much on fluidity as on expansion (ibid.).

In her introduction to the anthology *The Thunder Mutters*, Oswald emphasises the importance of movement, which is essential for determining what it means to be human (Oswald 2005, x). For Oswald, it seems to be manifested in the kind of poetry that sees neither nature nor landscape as a “mere conceit”, but remains open to the many centred energies of the natural world (ibid.). This openness is visible in many of the poems in *Woods etc.*, such as “Field”, where, as suggested by the

oxymoron “visible darkness”, the subject does not seek a place that is stable, identifiable and taxonomic (Oswald 2005a: 25). Rather, the speaking subject finds itself in the openness of “the big field behind the house” on “Easternight”, that is, in a space that is both physical, temporal and mythical, and where death, birth and rebirth could be seen to coincide. At the same time, the subject is also aware of itself as a corporeal being, as it stands in a field, looking at and listening to its own surroundings. According to Jean-Yves Lacoste in *Experience and the Absolute*, this is an essential point of departure. For Lacoste, the ipseity of the self is that which defines us and, as a consequence, the question of *where* we are must always precede that of *what* we are (Lacoste 2004: 7). In Oswald’s poem, the answer to this question is the large space of a field behind the house, at a time when the universe itself becomes dislocated by the mythical force of “Easternight”.

As the evening approaches midnight, the subject finds itself in a world that goes from being “wedged / between its premise and its conclusion” to being “unhorizoned / hung upon nothing, barking for its owner” (2005a: 25). Interestingly, the world’s displacement from a “visible darkness” to an “unhorizoned” nothingness corresponds to a change that takes place within the poetic subject. In the final verses of the poem, light seeps through the darkness and the speaker demonstrates an ability to register its surroundings in their acute presence: “docks, grasses, small windflowers, weepholes, wires” (ibid.).

In a short prose piece entitled “Wood Work”, Oswald indirectly comments on this aspect of her poetry while discussing her characteristic lack of punctuation. She says that “I like the look of the words all happening at once and the grammar having no homecoming”, and adds that as the poems are not arranged chronologically “the reader should immerse herself in one poem at a time or, better still, in one phrase, one word. Like Stockhausen’s music made of single points” (Oswald 2005b: 5). These two statements are also important for Oswald’s overall project, because they signal the way in which the poetic speaker’s question “who am I” in *Dart*, is always attended by that of “where am I”. In *Dart*, moreover, the initial question of “who” is followed by a relentless movement towards the sea, while the lack of punctuation and capital letters in “Sea Poem” (*Woods etc.*) creates the effect of simultaneously pointing back to *Dart* and forward to the other poems in that collection. At the same time, the second verse line heightens the immanence of the

words as they appear on the page: “what is water in the eyes of water / loose inquisitive fragile anxious” (Oswald 2005a: 3). The way these descriptions of being follow each other naturally, yet in a seeming random manner, gives the impression of a single thought that is at once instantaneous, illuminating and strangely transitory.

In the same way as Oswald, Lavinia Greenlaw places great emphasis on the physical presence of the body in the world. But while Oswald creates a mythical relation between the body and its surrounding scapes, Greenlaw tends to focus on the body’s mysterious boundaries and interiors in a more concrete and physical sense. In her collection *Minsk*, poems such as “The Dissection Room”, “The Parachute”, and “Lupins” all present a body which is opened up in order to un-veil something hidden thing. While the sought something remains an *objet a*, the sense that the body hides something, or that there is a presence to it that eludes the poetic persona, prevails. In many ways, the physical self appears as a complex landscape that the poetic persona feels the need to map or examine. When the mother dips her finger “in a dead man’s chest” in “The Dissection Room”, the poetic speaker says “Who could tell if what she was groping for / was a misericord, or, failing that, a rip cord?” signalling that while the search for a “ground” for standing or for comprehending may be perceived as an impossibility, the being still digs to uncover a hidden presence in the body that may function to provide a sense of dwelling (Greenlaw 2003: 5).

Interestingly, this reference to a “misericord” or a “rip cord”, is also evocative of Greenlaw’s prose text “Interior with Extension Cord”, where Elizabeth Bishop’s eponymous painting functions as a point of departure for talking about the nature of poetry as a whole. A poem, Greenlaw says, comes from making sense of how things work, of exploring machinery, pattern and design, which should also open up for the long view (Greenlaw 2000, 275). In Bishop’s painting, this is suggested by the other side of the doorway, which is vaguely presented in the corner of the room. Together with the extension cord, this other space signals the importance of always taking heed of the interplay between the internal and external, the near and far (2000: 276).

While Greenlaw’s later works are characterised by a move away from science and technology, the relationship between entities such as the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, being and non-being, presence and comprehension, near and far, still come under scrutiny. In her fourth

collection, *The Casual Perfect*, Greenlaw seems intent on exploring further what she, in her text on Bishop, calls “the distance one can travel”, or what she, in the poem “Superlocutions”, refers to as “the hidden continuous” that exists in-between things (Greenlaw 2000: 276; 2011: 4). In a review in *The Guardian*, Sean O'Brien also notes that Greenlaw in this collection is concerned with just “letting things be—landscapes, climates of feeling, people”, without forcing links or bonds between them (*The Guardian*, 14 October 2011). Or, as she phrases it herself in the poem “The Messenger God”—“[h]is message? / His presence. No other message”—signalling that being is what really grounds us and that this is what we need to recognise (Greenlaw 2011: 24). Thus, she also echoes Heidegger, who says that the human being is homeless because “Being remains concealed” (Heidegger 2000: 242). In order to overcome this sense of homelessness, we must take heed of Being, that is, we must recognise its being-in-the-world (ibid.).

A similar insight is mediated in poems where physical presence is challenged by the natural forces of weather and landscape, such as in “Hevenyssh”, where the view is “[s]o open” that “our presence is retraction” (2011: 25). While this withdrawal seems almost self-effacing, it also provides the poetic persona with a viewpoint from which the vastness of the sky can be taken in. The poem furthermore ends by pulling the being out from her automatised unresponsiveness to the world, allowing her to bring “my nature” to the landscape and occasion an encounter between the two that “lifts me from my heart” (2011: 25). This gesture does not amount to any kind of transcendence, but a recognition of the shared, but separate, existence of the above and the below, or between “my nature” and Nature, echoing the experiences of Shapcott’s poetic persona in “On Tour: The Alps” and Oswald’s in “Field” (ibid.).

Similarly, in “Severn”, the poetic subject experiences weather that comes “always and sideways” while the “river over-running river” carries off “the tree-chimney-telegraph / wreckage of your way home” (Greenlaw 2011: 29). While these forces are destructive and so overwhelming that they make the speaker declare that “[t]here is no way home”, the way itself, or, indeed, the distance, is simultaneously seen as a “rolling-up of the world”, making being-in-the-world acutely visible in its presence (ibid.). Or, Greenlaw says in “A Theory of Infinite

Proximity”, allowing presence to be “here in place, now in time” (2011: 38).

Faber’s presentation of the collection states that in these poems “questions are to be travelled fully rather than answered”, focussing on the moment at which perception is formed, rather than on what follows after. In this, Greenlaw once again echoes Heidegger, who declares that the question is not a passage over to something that lies or stands around somewhere. Rather, questions, are as they are actually asked, and this is the only way in which they are. In the poem “Superlocution”, Greenlaw informs the reader that “There is a way into the mountain”, where it “comes to rest / beneath the bed of a river” (2011: 4). In order for us to access the “hidden continuous”, however, we must be “as slow and sudden as a rock” (ibid.). We must be open to the movements of the landscape, the rushing of the wind, the sedimentary changes brought on by the sun and the rain and, as signalled in the titular poem “The Casual Perfect”, “[t]he becoming of quarts or iron” (2011: 5).

What all of this really amounts to, it seems, is an ability to “listen!” (ibid.). This imperative is also signalled in earlier poems, where Greenlaw has echoed Shapcott in underlining the importance of listening to one’s own speech in order to dwell. In *Consorting with Angels*, Deryn Rees-Jones notes that Greenlaw’s incorporation of the discourses of technology and science both comprises a critique of the dominant structures of patriarchy and a strategy of affirming and asserting her own speech on her own terms (Rees-Jones 2005: 228). Hence, Rees-Jones notes, Greenlaw addresses a “Russian mongrel bitch” in the early poem “For the First Dog in Space” and provides her with a warning (2005: 229):

Laika, do not let yourself be fooled
by the absolute stillness
that comes only with not knowing
how fast you are going. As you fall
in orbit around the earth, remember
your language. Listen to star dust.
Trust your fear.

(Greenlaw 1993: 52)

The manner in which Laika is caught in a circular pattern of non-being, destined to circle the planet earth until death overtakes it, is an interesting metaphorisation of human existence as dwelling. The being is

placed in a context which defies any sense of place and over which it has no control. In this non-place, however, which is also absolute space, language manifests itself as that which opens up to dwelling in the form of a landscape that permeates, yet stretches beyond, the self to the infinite macrocosmos of space, which is also transformed into a microcosmos through the reference to star dust.

The primary function of poetic language is to perform some similar purpose, and in this sense “For the First Dog in Space” is profoundly self-reflexive. This focus also evokes an interview with Alice Oswald, where she emphasises the importance of hearing, saying that “I’d much rather listen than look” and connects the exercise of listening to “that primitive mind [...] where your knowledge is stored” (Oswald 2003: 32). Listening, it seems, is connected with origins as the space where one may find a sense of recognition, of grounding, of belonging, and where the distance between two points is one of relation. In listening, one is able to open up to difference, to the margin, to movement, and or to the recognition that “our homecoming will be my homecoming”, as Greenlaw says in the epigraph to *Minsk*.

Only if we are listening, can we properly speak. And only if we are capable of dwelling, can we build. In his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking”, Heidegger says that “as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer” (Heidegger 2000: 363). It is the argument of this essay that this is process of thought is what we find in Shapcott, Oswald and Greenlaw. These poets speak to us and provide us with poetic dwellings that are beginnings, encounters, transformations, in-betweens and, above all, movement, emphasising an exploration of home and homelessness which is revolutionary, disruptive and transgressive. With these poetic dwellings, history is transformed into that which becomes even as the poet speaks.

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